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## **Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly**

By Muhamad S. Olimat<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Kuwaiti women's long struggle for a seat in the National Assembly culminated with remarkable success on May 16, 2009. For the very first time in Kuwait's political history, the women's movement managed to send four female representatives to the National Assembly. Their electoral success ushers a new phase in Kuwait's political process in which women finally become active participants. The goal of this article is to examine women's struggle for political rights, their electoral success, their role in current Kuwaiti politics, their accomplishments, and their future in politics in Kuwait.

*Keywords:* Kuwait, Women's National Assembly, Sunni, Shi'i Islam, Electoral Impediments, Electoral Success.

### **Introduction**

The long struggle of Kuwaiti women for parliamentary representation came to fruition on May 16, 2009 when Masooma Al Mubarak, Salwa Al Jassar, Aseel Al Awadi and Rula Dashti were elected to the National Assembly for the first time in Kuwait's history. Their success puts an end to the patriarchal monopoly over the legislature, and puts an end to five decades of struggle for women to gain their basic constitutional rights. Their march for political participation spanned over the past fifty years, since the early days of Kuwait's independence. In fact, their struggle went parallel to the socio-economic and political developments in the country since the mid- Twentieth Century onward. Kuwait was a British colony from 1899-1961, gained its independence in 1961, enhanced it "between" 1961-1990, and enjoyed remarkable levels of socio-economic and political development. However, Kuwait fell under the Iraqi occupation on August 2nd, 1990, and regained its independence five months later with the assistance of an international coalition that evicted Iraqi forces from the country. In the post-Iraqi period, Kuwait still deals with its consequences, and attempts to recover from such an event in the spheres of politics, social, economic, regional, and international relations.

Kuwaiti women have been an integral part of Kuwait's political history and its struggles and triumphs. However, Kuwaiti patriarchal society failed to recognize women's contributions to the country, or recognize their constitutional rights until 2005, and at last in 2009 women managed to send female representatives to the National Assembly for the first time.

The political history of Kuwait spans over three major periods; the pre-oil Kuwait which began in the early Eighteenth Century to 1961, the independent Kuwait from 1961 to the Iraqi invasion on August 2, 1990 and the Post-liberation Kuwait from 1991 to the present. In the pre-oil era, Kuwait was a small port with limited resources in the Arabian Gulf. The Emirate entered in a protection agreement with Britain in 1899 and granted independence in 1961. In the era of independence, Kuwait was a vibrant society empowered by an animated government, and endowed with abundance of oil wealth.

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However, its developmental efforts were greatly hampered by some domestic, regional, and international challenges that shaped its politics over the past half of the century. These include domestic, political, sectarian, and social strife, Gulf and Middle Eastern turbulence, Arab nationalism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranian Revolution, political Islam, the Iraq-Iran War, the Iraqi invasion, the American occupation of Iraq, and the current War on Terrorism. In spite of such challenges, Kuwait has managed to rebuild itself and provide a rich experience in democratization in the region, but its democratic process has not yet grown strong roots due to the constant discord between the government and the parliament. Currently, Kuwait is freer than most Arab countries, albeit cautious, and its politics are governed by security fears and sectarian divides among the Sunni and Shi'i communities.

Kuwait tried to maintain more or less frequent elections, but held a sort of parliamentary structure since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Table 1, provides a summary of Kuwait's parliamentary elections over the past eight decades in terms of number of candidates, number of districts, appointed and elected MPS, and sectarian affiliation. Kuwait's constitution organizes the political process in the country in terms of governmental structure, parliamentary procedures, and governance at large.

Table 1: Kuwait's Elections Since 1921

| Year | Number of Candidates | Number of Districts | Elected MPs | Appointed Cabinet/MPs | Sunni MPs | Shi'at MPs | Number of Women MPs |
|------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|---------------------|
| 2009 | 211                  | 5                   | 50          | 15                    | 41        | 9          | 4                   |
| 2008 | 275                  | 5                   | 50          | 15                    | 45        | 5          | 0                   |
| 2006 | 253                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 46        | 4          | 0                   |
| 2003 | 246                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 45        | 5          | 0                   |
| 1999 | 287                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 44        | 6          | 0                   |
| 1996 | 229                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 45        | 5          | 0                   |
| 1992 | 278                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 45        | 5          | 0                   |
| 1985 | 231                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 47        | 3          | 0                   |
| 1981 | 446                  | 25                  | 50          | 15                    | 46        | 4          | 0                   |
| 1975 | 86                   | 10                  | 50          | 15                    | 41        | 9          | 0                   |
| 1971 | 191                  | 10                  | 50          | 15                    | 44        | 6          | 0                   |
| 1967 | 219                  | 10                  | 50          | 15                    | 42        | 8          | 0                   |
| 1963 | 202                  | 10                  | 50          | 15                    | 45        | 5          | 0                   |
| 1962 | NA                   | 10                  | 20          | 15                    | 18        | 2          | 0                   |
| 1938 | NA                   | NA                  | 20          | NA                    | 20        | 0          | 0                   |
| 1921 | NA                   | NA                  | 20          | NA                    | 20        | 0          | 0                   |

- Data collected from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior website: <http://www.moi.gov.kw/portal/venglish/>
- Michael Herb's database on Kuwait's elections: <http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/database.htm>
- Author's calculations.

## **The Conservative Bind: Women's Rights in Theory and Practice in Kuwait**

The Kuwaiti Constitution ratified in 1961 provided for a wide-range of equal freedoms for the people of Kuwait. In Part III entitled Public Rights and Duties, the Constitution provided freedoms comparable to the most advanced democracies, such as the United States, France, Britain, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, as the framers of the document were well versed in constitutional law and were heavily influenced by the constitutions of these countries. In addition, Kuwait's history, traditions, values, customs, and its Arab-Islamic heritage and body of jurisprudence inspired the Kuwaiti Constitution.

In the Equality Article (29), the constitution states that "All people are equal in human dignity and in public rights and duties before the law, without distinction of race, origin, language or religion," but oddly, the article does not mention "gender," and it can be argued that it did include women and can be used as constitutional grounds to expand their rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the constitution provides for citizenship and nationality rights (27), right to residency (28), equality (29), personal liberty (30), unreasonable search and freedom of movement (31), due process of law (32), personal reasonability and protection from collective punishment (33), presumption of innocence (34), freedom of religion (35), freedom of expression (36), freedom of the press (37), sanctity of the home (38), freedom of communication from censorship and prior-restraint (39), right to education free of charge (40), the right to employment (41), no forced labor (42), freedom of association and the right to civil-society institutional building (43), freedom of assembly (44), the right to petition authorities (45), and the protection of political refugees (46). Moreover, the constitution lists some duties such as national defense (47), and the "observance of public order and respect for public morals [that] are a duty incumbent upon all inhabitants of Kuwait" as major pillars of the Kuwaiti society.<sup>1</sup>

In theory, the aforementioned freedoms and liberties are comparable to the most advanced constitutions worldwide. They also constitute a solid ground for the advancement of women's rights and status in Kuwait. However, in practical terms women in particular suffered most from systematic discrimination. They had to struggle over half a century to gain some of their basic freedoms guaranteed by the constitution decades earlier, especially those pertaining to political participation and political freedoms. Other rights and privileges, such as equality in housing opportunities, full citizenship rights, and employment opportunities are yet to materialize in Kuwait. Al-Mughni states it like this:

"The constitution of Kuwait declares men and women be equal before the law and guarantees them equal rights to education and paid employment. But equality means guaranteeing not only of equal rights, but also of equal opportunities for both men and women. In practice, the principle of equality has been absent from state policies. For instance, the Electoral Law denies women the right to vote or to run for election."<sup>2</sup>

The most oppressive manifestation of discrimination against women in Kuwait was the election law of 35/1962 that excluded women from politics. Article (1) gives "to every Kuwaiti male of twenty one years of age the right to vote,"<sup>3</sup> but excludes women from the political sphere and confines them to their homes. The male-controlled

legislature vehemently opposed women's rights until 2005. At times, the assembly introduced strict gender-segregation bills, especially those in 1992 that were inconsistent with popular demands and women's contribution to public life in Kuwait.

Women participated actively in the liberation of Kuwait and expected rewards commensurate with their contributions and sacrifices. The continued lack of support of the assembly to women's political rights compelled the Amir (ruler) to issue decrees to enfranchise women, as it happened in the May 16, 1999 decree that was struck down by the conservative assembly soon after. Such setbacks never deterred women from continuing their struggle for political participation. On the contrary, they intensified the debate in the country and generated popular support for their active participation in politics.

### **Women and the Modernization Process in Kuwait**

Kuwaiti women's struggle for political participation paralleled socioeconomic and political development in the country over the past century. In pre-oil Kuwait women were totally excluded from public life. Al-Mughni states that in this period women lived in total seclusion to the extent that "the world of women has been so cut off from that of men that any history of Kuwait requires a separate chapter devoted to women."<sup>4</sup> In post-oil Kuwait the grip of social exclusion began to loosen, but was never broken. Women were active participants in the modernization process and benefited from educational and financial resources made available; they achieved remarkable socioeconomic successes but lagged far behind in the area of political development.

In order to make up for the deficiency in political participation, the women's movement established organizations to advance their cause and promote their rights and freedoms. They also channeled their energies into social development, education, cultural activities, sports, and charitable care. Women's organizations also provided women with a voice in the public square, expanding their opportunities and fighting for their political rights. This proved to be an agonizing process that consumed their energies for fifty years.

In the first three decades of the post-independence period, three secular women's organizations competed for a voice in the country: the Cultural and Social Society (CSS), established in 1963, was the voice of women in the merchant class, while the Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS), licensed the same year, was the voice of middle class Kuwaiti women. Finally, the Girls Club was established in 1976. Al-Mughni found that the two main organizations, the CSS and AWDS "had very few contacts with one another. Each group pursued its own activities based on its own view of the correct role of women in the society. The CSS saw its role specifically in terms of providing entertainment for its members and charity for the poor, whereas the AWDS aimed to modernize society and raise the status of women."<sup>5</sup> The lack of a working relationship between them proved to be detrimental to the cause as a whole, and had a negative impact on the women's movement in Kuwait. Results of this collision were apparent in the 2008 elections, when women accustomed to historical discord failed to support their gender, leading to their utter loss. Remarkably, the Kuwaiti government made efforts to unite both organizations, and this finally led to the establishment of the Kuwaiti Women Union (KWU) in December of 1974, but they remained organizationally separate. Due to rivalry between the two groups, a third organization -the Girls Club- was

formed in 1976, but the continual contention between CSS and AWDS prompted the government to dissolve the KWU on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1977, and to dissolve AWDS on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1980.

The disbanding of AWDS left middle class women with no organizational representation, a trend that continued to have devastating results on women's achievements in Kuwait. Some of them found refuge in Islamic women associations from the 1980s onward. In retrospect, AWDS's most celebrated achievement was the 1973 Equal Rights Bill before the National Assembly that highlighted women's quest for "equal rights"<sup>6</sup> in all societal spheres. At the center of the bill was AWDS's demand for equal political rights and restrictions on polygamy. While a momentum was generated for the enfranchisement of women, parliamentarians vehemently rejected any restriction on polygamy, and were alarmed by the scope of feminist demands.

The 1980s witnessed the Islamic Revival and resurgence of Islam. At the heart of the movement the mosque became the center of life and politics in the Middle East and in the Islamic World. Like other countries in the region, Kuwait was influenced heavily by this trend. Kuwaiti Islamic women established two civil society organizations, the Bayader al-Salam and the Islamic Care Society to represent the emerging Islamic voice in Kuwaiti politics. Their goals covered a wide range of issues including charity, ethics, and morality, and contributed to the Islamic project. However, their agenda and mandate went far beyond Kuwait to include the Islamic causes of Palestine, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Muslims in Africa, as they were part of international Islamic brotherhood societies in particular. The latter aimed to accomplish "the Islamic Project," entailing a comprehensive process of Islamization of state and society across the Islamic world.

The government of Kuwait renewed its interest in women's political participation in the 1980s. In 1981, the Crown Prince stated that "the time has come to take note of the position of the Kuwaiti woman and her effective role in society, and put forward the matter of the vote to study and discussion."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Al-Takheim, a member of the parliament supportive of women's enfranchisement, introduced a modest bill that called for granting women the right to vote, but not to hold office. The bill was defeated by a margin of 27 to 7, with 16 members abstaining.

The Kuwaiti women's movement was not deterred by the setback and continued its struggle for enfranchisement. In 1982, some nationalist and Islamist parliamentarians reintroduced the bill for vote, but the assembly's Legal Affairs Committee blocked the bill and asked for a religious edict from the Ministry of Islamic Endowments and Islamic Affairs on whether it was possible for women to participate in politics. The ministry issued its edict on July 24, 1985 stating that "the nature of the electoral process befits men who are endowed with ability and expertise; it is not permissible for women to recommend or nominate other women or men."<sup>8</sup> Muslim Brothers, liberals, nationalists, and feminists protested the edict, and the Amir of Kuwait suspended the assembly a few months later.

Kuwait went through a period of political stagnation until the Iraqi invasion in summer of 1990. In this period, the Kuwaiti women's movement retreated to household issues while the Kuwaiti government and the region were preoccupied with the devastating Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath, the consequences of the Israeli occupation of Beirut, the growing influence of the Palestinian community in Kuwait, the decline of oil revenues, and internal strife. By far, the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 was the most catastrophic event to ever happen in Kuwait, and its impact would be heavily felt on state and society alike.

In post-war Kuwait, women's issues were on top of the national agenda. Their participation in liberation efforts was recognized and the government sought to reward them. It also conceded that the absence of parliament caused the deterioration of political conditions in the country, leading to the invasion of Iraq. There was tremendous chaos as Kuwait struggled to rebuild itself. Major fights broke between political forces, especially between liberals and Islamists. One aspect of such conflicts was that the Sunni-Muslim Brotherhood movement revised its position against women's suffrage, while liberals and Shi'at-Islamists continued their support of women's struggle for political participation.

Kuwait was very polarized, politically and socially. Repeatedly in the 1990s, calls to enfranchise women were utterly rejected. Furthermore, in 1992 Sunni Islamists supported by conservative tribal MPs introduced a sort of apartheid legislation that sought to segregate the Kuwaiti society along gender lines. The decade of the 1990s was consumed by discord that led to the repeated and premature dissolution of parliament. The conflict made it impossible to govern to the extent that the ruler of Kuwait, Amir Jaber dissolved parliament on May 3, 1999, called for elections as the constitution stipulated in article 107, and issued 63 decrees among which was "granting women the right to run for office and to vote in parliamentary and municipal election by 2003, which surprised politicians, observers and women alike."<sup>9</sup> The new parliament utterly rejected the 63 decrees, and a bill was introduced in parliament on November 30, 1999 in which women lost 32 to 30, with two abstentions, and six members absent.

Amir Jaber made the last successful attempt to enfranchise women in May 2005. The assembly approved it on May 16, 2005 by a margin of 35 to 23. Therefore, Article I of the election law (35/162) reads: "every adult Kuwaiti citizen, aged 21, has the right to vote, except a naturalized citizen who has not been in that status for at least 20 years." It further states that "Kuwaiti women voting and running for political office should do so while fully adhering to the dictates of Islamic Shari'a."<sup>10</sup> The suffrage of women doubled the number of the electorate from 195,000 to 350,000, with women representing 57% of the electorate. Granting women political equality was not only a moral imperative but also a culmination of hard work on the part of the women's movement in Kuwait for over fifty years. It was also the result of education, youth involvement in politics, societal openness, the impact of regional and global trends of democratization, and the need for such a move in Kuwaiti's domestic political equation.

Despite the remarkable achievements women have made in the socio-economic realm, they lagged far behind politically. In Kuwait they represent 33.8% of the labor force and 70% of higher education institution's graduates, and have a literacy rate of (81.0)<sup>11</sup>, but their political accomplishments remained marginal until 2009 when they managed to send four female representatives to the National Assembly.

### **Women and the 2009, 2008 and 2006 Elections**

Women participated vigorously in the last three electoral cycles in Kuwait. The nature of such engagement, organization, or the lack thereof, impacted women's electoral accomplishments and potential in Kuwait. The election law (35/1962) and its modified versions in 1981 and 2005, governs electoral politics in the country. Accordingly, the

2006, the 2008, and the 2009 parliamentary elections were held under two different electoral systems, though the unifying element was women's active involvement.

The 2006 election was organized under the 25-district system: 25 electoral districts in which Kuwait was divided, each of which with two seats, while the 2009 and 2008 elections were organized under the 5-districts system, each of which enjoyed 10 parliamentary seats. Legislators served for four years with no term limit and eligible voters were granted four votes to cast in the National Assembly's elections. The law prohibits members of the armed forces, police personnel, and members of the ruling family from running or voting in the elections. The law also prohibits naturalized citizens of less than thirty years from running for office, but not from voting.

The three elections are comparable among themselves as far as enthusiasm, organization, resources devoted to the elections, and platforms are concerned, though women's issues occupied center stage in the 2009 elections. This is due to the fact that women became viable candidates for the first time, and male candidates competed as never before for women's vote. This process promoted male candidates to give substantial support and concessions to women in the areas of social services and employment opportunities. Tables 2 and 3 provide data on districts, precincts, number of male and female candidates, number of male and female voters, and the total electoral number of voters. Obviously, women represent the majority with 57% of votes in the country. Though partially, they managed to utilize their voting power for the first time, and if they manage to employ their electoral power in full, they should be able to send a minimum of 10 MPs to the assembly in the near future.

Table 2: Number of districts, precinct, number of male and female candidates, total number of candidates, number of female and male voters and total electoral votes for the 2009 elections.

| Districts | Number of Precincts | Number of Male Candidates | Number of Female Candidates | Total Number of Candidates | Number of Male Voters | Number of Female Voters | Total Electoral Votes |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1         | 19                  | 43                        | 2                           | 45                         | 31,613                | 37,519                  | 69,132                |
| 2         | 13                  | 44                        | 1                           | 45                         | 20,380                | 23,093                  | 43,473                |
| 3         | 15                  | 44                        | 10                          | 54                         | 27,754                | 34,833                  | 62,587                |
| 4         | 18                  | 31                        | 4                           | 35                         | 43,552                | 56,330                  | 99,882                |
| 5         | 20                  | 31                        | 1                           | 32                         | 52,380                | 57,336                  | 109,716               |
| Total     | 85                  | 193                       | 18                          | 211                        | 175,679               | 209,111                 | 384,790               |

- Data provided by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior at: <http://www.moi.gov.kw/portal/venglish/>

The most remarkable aspect of the 2009 election was electing four female candidates to the National Assembly. Women's struggle paid off when Massoma Al Mubarak not only won a seat in her district, but also ranked the highest among winners in her district (1) enjoying 14,247/69,132. Salwa Al Jassar won a seat in the 2nd district, while Aseel Al Awadi and Rula Dashti won seats in the 3rd district. No female candidate made it to the assembly due to the electoral composition and the conservative nature of



the electorate in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> district. Table 3, provides information on female MPs, districts, number of votes and rank among their counterparts in their districts.

Table 3: Female winners, district, number of votes/total votes and rank

| Candidate          | District | Number of votes | Number of Total Votes in the District | Rank among Winners in District |
|--------------------|----------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Masooma Al Mubarak | 1        | 14247           | 69,132                                | 1 <sup>st</sup>                |
| Salwa Al Jassar    | 2        | 4776            | 43,473                                | 10 <sup>th</sup>               |
| Aseel Al Awadi     | 3        | 11860           | 62,587                                | 2 <sup>ed</sup>                |
| Rula Dashti        | 3        | 7666            | 62,587                                | 7 <sup>th</sup>                |

- Al Jareda Daily, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

In the 2009 election candidates fought fiercely for women's vote. This explains the fact that women's issues were dominant in electoral platforms. Women demanded equal housing and employment opportunities. They also demanded citizenship rights to children born to Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti citizens. The current Kuwaiti law and governmental policies are clearly in violation of the constitution as they treat differently Kuwaiti males and females married to non-nationals. While Kuwaiti men married to non-Kuwaiti women enjoy the full protection of the law, Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men do not have any such rights or privileges. Their children are not considered citizens and are not entitled to citizenship, or socio-economic or political rights and privileges.

Platforms in the 2009 elections varied slightly between the first three districts, but widely between the first three districts and the fourth and fifth districts. In the first district, candidate's platforms covered a wide range of issues, such as economic development, employment, health care, education, civil rights, human rights, combating corruption, and sectarianism.<sup>12</sup> Massoma Al Mubarak, a former cabinet minister and a leading figure in the women's movement, strongly criticized Islamists' views on women in parliament, sectarian and tribal allegiance, called for national unity and equality among citizens regardless of ethnic, sectarian, or religious background. Al Mubarak was the top winner in her own district 1. The table below provides some information on district 1.

Table 4: District 1- Top Ten Winners and Number of Votes

| Number | Name                | Male/Female | Number of Votes |
|--------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Masooma Al Mubarak  | F           | 14247           |
| 2      | Hussein Al Bahrani  | M           | 13305           |
| 3      | Hussein Al Hareerty | M           | 10611           |
| 4      | Yousef Al Zalzal    | M           | 10493           |
| 5      | Faisal Al Duissan   | M           | 9943            |
| 6      | Saleh Ashour        | M           | 8314            |
| 7      | Abdullah Al Rumi    | M           | 7746            |
| 8      | Mukhlid Al Azemi    | M           | 7536            |
| 9      | Hasan Jawhar        | M           | 6827            |
| 10     | Adnan Zahid         | M           | 6717            |

Source: compiled from data provided by the Kuwaiti National Assembly at: <http://www.majlesalommah.net/clt/run.asp?id=1428>

In district 2, platforms focused on the issues of development, protecting the constitution and implementing it, educational reform, and dealing with the unemployment crisis. There was a call for legalizing political parties, increasing salaries, debt forgiveness, and prohibiting electoral primaries. The table below presents data on winners, gender, and the number of votes for each MP.

Table 5: District 2 - Top Ten Winners and Number of Votes

| Number | Name                  | Male/Female | Number of Votes |
|--------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Marzouq Al Ghanem     | M           | 7596            |
| 2      | Ali Al Rashir         | M           | 6826            |
| 3      | Jasem Al Kuhrafi      | M           | 6472            |
| 4      | Jam'an Al Hurbash     | M           | 5929            |
| 5      | Abdulrahman Al Anjeri | M           | 5168            |
| 6      | Khalid Issa           | M           | 5061            |
| 7      | Khalaf Al Enizi       | M           | 4945            |
| 8      | Muhammad Al Mutair    | M           | 4932            |
| 9      | Adnan Al Mutaw'e      | M           | 4781            |
| 10     | Salwa Al Jassar       | F           | 4776            |

Source: compiled from data provided by the Kuwaiti National Assembly at: <http://www.majlesalommah.net/clt/run.asp?id=1428>

The 3rd district was probably the most exciting in the 2009 elections in terms of popular involvement in the process, and in the nature of political fights that erupted among candidates. Aseel Awadi, a university professor at Kuwait University, and Mohammad Haief, an Islamists engaged in fierce “moral” attacks. Awadi was target of a campaign of vicious personal attacks that accused her of moral decadence and apostasy. Her political opponents had a female student of Dr. Awadi at Kuwait University tape a

lecture she had given on Critical Thinking. Her lecture was posted on YouTube, and her statements were misconstrued. Islamists led the attacks, mainly Mohammad Haief who led the apostasy charge. Awadai fiercely fought the allegations in the public square as well as in courts. She emerged a winner and won a seat in the 3rd district.<sup>13</sup>

Awadi's campaign focused on topics like employment, culture, arts, and privatization, and provided a critical evolution plan to the performance of the government in the economic sphere in particular. She criticized the sectarian and religious divide in the country, and called for a "social safety net" for Kuwaitis to provide social peace and harmony. She also focused attention to the plight of over 100,000 people who live in Kuwait called "stateless or *Bedoon*." These groups are deprived of such civil rights as being able to apply for an ID card, driver's license, birth or death certificate, employment rights, etc. Awadi called on a serious national dialogue to resolve the crisis of "stateless" people.

Candidates in platforms for district 3 dealt with issues related to the economy, the rule of law, and were critical of government performance, of the sectarian divide, of vote-buying, health care, protecting and implanting the constitution, and critical of the 2008 assembly, debt forgiveness, and of prohibiting the primaries. The table below provides some information on district 3 in terms of candidates, gender, and number of votes.

Table 6: District 3- Number of candidates, name, gender, and number of votes

| Number | Name               | Male/Female | Number of Votes |
|--------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Rawdan Al Rawdan   | M           | 13107           |
| 2      | Aseel Al Awadi     | F           | 11860           |
| 3      | Ahmed Al Sadoon    | M           | 10969           |
| 4      | Faisal Al Otaibi   | M           | 9295            |
| 5      | Saleh Al Mulla     | M           | 9075            |
| 6      | Naji Abed Al Hadi  | M           | 8329            |
| 7      | Rula Dashti        | F           | 7666            |
| 8      | Adel Al Sarawei    | M           | 7552            |
| 9      | Waleed Al Tabtabai | M           | 7452            |
| 10     | Ali Al Omeir       | M           | 6573            |

Compiled from data provided by the Kuwaiti National Assembly at:

<http://www.majlesalommah.net/clt/run.asp?id=1429>

In district 4 (table 7), candidates focused on issues of economic development, educational reform, combating inflation, opposition to prohibiting tribal primaries, debt-forgiveness, calling for political freedoms, and supporting women's rights. Dealing with the issue of "stateless" people, or the *Bedoon* was very strong in the 4<sup>th</sup> District. The *Bedoon* reside in the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> districts, primarily.

Table 7: District 4- Number of candidates, name, gender, and number of votes

| Number | Name                 | Male/Female | Number of Votes |
|--------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Mussalam Al Barak    | M           | 18779           |
| 2      | Muhammad Al Mutairi  | M           | 16200           |
| 3      | Hussain Al Dehani    | M           | 13388           |
| 4      | Difu Allah Abu Ramya | M           | 13112           |
| 5      | Asker Al Enezi       | M           | 12869           |
| 6      | Ali Al Dugbasi       | M           | 12649           |
| 7      | Shua'ib Al Muaizeri  | M           | 12385           |
| 8      | Mubarak Al Welan     | M           | 12324           |
| 9      | Mubarak Al Khurineej | M           | 12132           |
| 10     | Sa'd Al Rashedi      | M           | 11836           |

Compiled from data provided by the Kuwaiti National Assembly at:

<http://www.majlesalommah.net/clt/run.asp?id=1430>

In the 5<sup>th</sup> District (table 8), candidates called for maintaining the *Diwanyas* as political forum, called for quality health care services for Kuwaitis with special needs, debt forgiveness, increasing the salaries, a stop in criminal electoral primaries, anti-sectarianism, unemployment, and strong support in resolving the issues of the “stateless,” given the fact that most of them reside in the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> district. The stateless also have strong family ties to Kuwaitis given the strength of the tribal presence in those two districts, but surprisingly, there is no support for political parties or modern political organizations. The main vehicles for political participation in those districts are the tribe, not modern arrangements.

Table 8: District 5 - Number of candidates, name, gender, and number of votes

| Number | Name               | Male/Female | Number of Votes |
|--------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Flaah Al Azemi     | M           | 16602           |
| 2      | Sadoun Al Otaibi   | M           | 15647           |
| 3      | Salem Al Azemi     | M           | 15637           |
| 4      | Sa'ad Al Azemi     | M           | 15393           |
| 5      | Ghanem Al Me'e     | M           | 15202           |
| 6      | Khaled Tahoos      | M           | 14103           |
| 7      | Al Saifi Al Ajmi   | M           | 14025           |
| 8      | Dulihi Al Hajri    | M           | 13905           |
| 9      | Mohammad Al Hueila | M           | 13331           |
| 10     | Badi Al Dussari    | M           | 12986           |

Compiled from data provided by the Kuwaiti National Assembly at:

<http://www.majlesalommah.net/clt/run.asp?id=1431>

In the 2008 elections, women were active participants in the debate but were unable to win any seat in the national assembly due to several impediments, among which are heavy competition between leading female candidates, lack of female-voter support for women, and inefficient electoral campaigns. The table below provides some information on the 2008 elections in terms of districts, precincts, candidates, and total vote.

Table 9: The 2008 Elections: number of districts, precincts, candidates, number of male and female voters:

| Districts | Number of Precincts | Number of Male Candidates | Number of Female Candidates | Number of Candidates | Number of Male Voters | Number of Female Voters | Total Electoral Votes |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1         | 19                  | 61                        | 4                           | 65                   | 30070                 | 36571                   | 66641                 |
| 2         | 13                  | 45                        | 2                           | 47                   | 19262                 | 22103                   | 41365                 |
| 3         | 15                  | 44                        | 12                          | 56                   | 25618                 | 33056                   | 58674                 |
| 4         | 18                  | 49                        | 5                           | 54                   | 39360                 | 54351                   | 93711                 |
| 5         | 20                  | 49                        | 4                           | 53                   | 46876                 | 54418                   | 101294                |
| Total     | 85                  | 248                       | 27                          | 275                  | 161186                | 200499                  | 361687                |

- Data provided by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior at:

<http://www.moi.gov.kw/portal/venglish/>

- Author's calculations.

In the 2006 elections women also took an active role in the process but were unable to win any seats because the political conditions were very challenging for women. Given the fact that women won the right to vote only a year earlier, they did not have sufficient time to prepare and win seats. The table below provides some information on the 25 districts in the country.

Table 10: The 2006 Elections: districts, total vote, number of candidates, eligible male and female who exercised their vote, and total turnout:

| District Number | Total Votes | Number of Candidates | Males Eligible | Females Eligible | Male voted | Female Voted | Male vote Percentage | Female vote Percentage | Total Turnout Percentage |
|-----------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------|------------------|------------|--------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1               | 6959        | 11                   | 3794           | 3165             | 3221       | 2170         | 85                   | 69                     | 77                       |
| 2               | 5119        | 8                    | 2392           | 2727             | 1996       | 2063         | 83                   | 76                     | 79                       |
| 3               | 5158        | 8                    | 2540           | 2618             | 1980       | 1752         | 78                   | 67                     | 72                       |
| 4               | 7374        | 14                   | 3817           | 3557             | 3152       | 2523         | 83                   | 71                     | 77                       |
| 5               | 7614        | 11                   | 3589           | 4025             | 2951       | 2833         | 82                   | 70                     | 76                       |
| 6               | 7938        | 10                   | 3354           | 4584             | 2634       | 3050         | 79                   | 67                     | 72                       |
| 7               | 6690        | 6                    | 3229           | 3461             | 2657       | 2422         | 82                   | 70                     | 76                       |
| 8               | 20139       | 11                   | 7709           | 12430            | 6140       | 7155         | 80                   | 58                     | 66                       |
| 9               | 7873        | 9                    | 3465           | 4408             | 2821       | 3028         | 81                   | 69                     | 74                       |
| 10              | 18779       | 16                   | 6882           | 11897            | 6547       | 5224         | 75                   | 59                     | 67                       |
| 11              | 12962       | 13                   | 4896           | 8066             | 4714       | 4531         | 54                   | 52                     | 67                       |
| 12              | 14084       | 15                   | 4977           | 9107             | 3948       | 5060         | 79                   | 56                     | 64                       |
| 13              | 14672       | 15                   | 7364           | 7308             | 5890       | 4827         | 80                   | 66                     | 73                       |
| 14              | 8837        | 10                   | 4735           | 4102             | 3952       | 2832         | 83                   | 69                     | 77                       |
| 15              | 19847       | 6                    | 8748           | 11099            | 6760       | 6496         | 77                   | 59                     | 67                       |
| 16              | 16559       | 8                    | 7032           | 9527             | 5418       | 6034         | 77                   | 63                     | 69                       |
| 17              | 20025       | 7                    | 7489           | 12536            | 5836       | 6733         | 78                   | 54                     | 63                       |
| 18              | 13481       | 11                   | 6064           | 7417             | 4929       | 5104         | 81                   | 69                     | 74                       |
| 19              | 17823       | 11                   | 5952           | 11871            | 4570       | 6695         | 77                   | 56                     | 63                       |
| 20              | 15782       | 9                    | 7144           | 8638             | 5645       | 5174         | 79                   | 60                     | 69                       |
| 21              | 30970       | 10                   | 11512          | 19458            | 7887       | 9286         | 69                   | 48                     | 55                       |
| 22              | 16981       | 7                    | 8412           | 8569             | 6198       | 4498         | 74                   | 52                     | 63                       |
| 23              | 15319       | 6                    | 6581           | 8738             | 4625       | 4348         | 70                   | 50                     | 59                       |
| 24              | 17572       | 11                   | 8704           | 8868             | 6547       | 5224         | 75                   | 59                     | 69                       |
| 25              | 11691       | 6                    | 4957           | 6734             | 3114       | 2056         | 63                   | 31                     | 44                       |
| Total           | 340248      | 221                  | 145338         | 194910           | 111118     | 114132       | 33.5. 2%             | 32.7%                  | 66.2%                    |

- Table is compiled of data provided by the Kuwait Ministry of Interior at: <http://www.moi.gov.kw/portal/venglish/> on the official results of the June 29<sup>th</sup> Elections of the 11<sup>th</sup> Kuwait National Assembly. The total eligible voters were 340,248 including 194,910 women and 145,338 men. Total voter-turn out was 66.2%.

- Author's calculations from data provided by KUNA, Newspapers, and other sources.

### Kuwaiti Women and Electoral Impediments

In a previous article<sup>14</sup>, I discussed the main electoral obstacles to women's electoral success in the 2006 and the 2008 elections. In the 2009 elections it was evident that women had managed to overcome some of these obstacles because they were able to obtain a limited, but remarkable electoral triumph. Women constitute 57% of the electorate in Kuwait. In practical terms, women should have at least 27 to 50 members, or

the equivalent of 50% or more in the National Assembly, since they constitute the majority of the vote in the country. Women also managed to infiltrate districts 1, 2, and 3, but were unable to breakdown the rigidity in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> districts. Women's success in 2009 will most definitely aid them in future elections, though some obstacles continue to have a destructive impact on women in Kuwait. Their inability to win any seat in the Eleventh (2006) or the Twelfth Assembly (2008) is due to several reasons:

### **Time Considerations and the Election**

The margin of time necessary for women to prepare for elections was a major issue that affected electoral outcomes. In the 2006 election time was detrimental to the women's cause; it had a mixed impact on the 2008 elections, while it had a positive impact on the 2009 elections. Women gained their right to run for office on May 19, 2005, while the Tenth Assembly's election was organized on June 29, 2006. Women had one year to overturn decades, if not centuries of cultural and other electoral impediments. Observers noticed that "Kuwaitis were left with little time to prepare, especially women who are newcomers to the electoral process."<sup>15</sup> In fact, political forces in Kuwait were ambushed when the ruler dissolved the assembly prematurely, one year into its four years term, due to irreconcilable differences with the government. In some previous confrontational episodes with parliament, Kuwaiti rulers took considerable time to announce the next election's date, to reinstate the parliament or suspend it indefinitely.

The current Amir, Sabah, opted for a swift popular vote on redistricting by announcing early elections. Kuwaiti women who counted on a margin of time of two years to prepare for elections were shocked to learn that they had only five weeks to undo the impact of decades of male dominance in parliament and the effects of centuries of a political culture that did not welcome their participation in public life. At least one year was desperately needed to build name recognition for female candidates, spread awareness among women on the value of their vote, and build coalitions. Women needed more time to organize training seminars in electoral politics, secure funds, and develop an independent electoral preference free from spousal, familial, or tribal intervention. Furthermore, they needed time to restructure the Kuwaiti women's movement and to adjust its platform to compete on equal footing with well-established patriarchal dominance in the politics of the country.

In the May 2008 elections, time was a factor but not the reason for women's inability to win any seat in the parliament. Women had ample time, more than two years, to prepare for the election, but they did not utilize time to their advantage. Less preparation coincided with complacency: thinking that the 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly would finish its constitutional term (2006-2010) contributed to women's electoral difficulties. On the other hand, in the 2009 elections women had ample time to prepare and compete very strongly in the process. They had four full years and three elections in which they contested seats.

Though women managed to win four seats, electoral impediments that limit their potential continue to persist in Kuwait. Even though they are the majority, they are well educated, and are more than capable of competing they should have won a minimum of ten seats in the 2009 elections. The time frame could have been utilized more efficiently by establishing a better working relationship within the women's movement itself. Moreover, they could have built bridges between existing political forces in the country.

This is not a criticism of women's accomplishments but a remark to motivate them to use the timeframe for greater accomplishments.

### **Heavy Competition among Women Candidates**

Heavy competition among women candidates continues to have a devastating impact. It limited their opportunities in the 2006 elections, it destroyed any electoral potential for women in the 2008 one, and limited the scope of their success in 2009. Women did not comprehend the urgency to unify their vote, and missed the opportunity to do so. In 2006, year in which two leading female figures –Dashti and Anjari-competed, they split their vote in critical areas like the Tenth District, leading to their loss, and in District 3 a catastrophic split of women's vote between Awadi and Dashti led again to their failure in 2008.

The same scenario nearly threatened both Dashti and Awadi in the 2009 elections, though both managed to win seats in the 3rd district given the fact that women's presence there proved to be solid. However, Dashti marginally won the 10/10 spot, while Awadi won the 7/1- spot. In 2008, if either Awadi or Dashti had withdrawn or coordinated with the other, women would have won at least one seat in District 3. The combined vote of Awadi and Dashti was 9637, which would easily have put one of them in the 6/10 position. While heavy competition might have been understandable in the 2006 elections as women were experimenting with electoral democracy, they had no excuse in 2008 or 2009 given that all indications alerted them to the necessity of unifying their vote to secure representation in parliament.

### **Rivalry, Animosity, and Division within the Women's Movement**

Since the 1960s, rivalry, animosity, and division continue to have devastating consequences on women in Kuwait. In the Post-Oil era class divisions and the escalation of conflict among women led to the disbanding of the Kuwait Women's Union in 1974. Rivalry and conflict among leading figures that belonged to different classes made it impossible for women to work together in both the 2006 and 2008 elections.<sup>16</sup> Divisions seemed unbridgeable. In 2009, these threatened women's opportunities and ended women's hopes for any seat in the 2006 and 2008 elections. The table below shows the intensity of women's competition in 2008 and its impact on women's defeat.

In the 2008 elections (Table 11) women's heavy competition impeded their electoral potential and led to their utter loss. A minimum level of coordination and compromise among women would most certainly have led to winning at least one seat in parliament. Awadi and Dashti, who ran in District 3, had a combined vote 9637 which put anyone of them in the 6 out of 10 candidates.



Table 11: Names of female candidates, number of votes, district, and the number of voters in the district.

| Candidate          | Number of Votes | District | Number of Votes in the District |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| Aseel Al Awadi     | 5173            | 3        | 39848                           |
| Rula Dashti        | 4464            | 3        | 39848                           |
| Salwa Al Jassar    | 2215            | 2        | 41365                           |
| Fatima Abdali      | 2184            | 1        | 66641                           |
| Thikra Al Rashidi  | 2122            | 4        | 93711                           |
| Fatima Al Naham    | 686             | 5        | 101294                          |
| Nadia Ali          | 558             | 5        | 101294                          |
| Ghanima Al Haider  | 432             | 3        | 39848                           |
| Aisha Al Khalifi   | 428             | 3        | 39848                           |
| Khalida Al Khader  | 374             | 2        | 41365                           |
| Sameera Al Shati   | 364             | 5        | 101294                          |
| Khazna Al Omani    | 348             | 5        | 101294                          |
| Najlaa Al Nagi     | 337             | 1        | 66641                           |
| Thikra Al Majdali  | 300             | 4        | 93711                           |
| Nadia Al Gina'i    | 279             | 1        | 66641                           |
| Shikha Al Ghanim   | 175             | 3        | 39848                           |
| Ameena Al Ghalaf   | 151             | 1        | 66641                           |
| Aisha Al Rajihi    | 125             | 4        | 93711                           |
| Salwa Al Mutairi   | 107             | 4        | 93711                           |
| Naema Al Hai       | 97              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Aisha Al Omiri     | 92              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Alia Al Enezi      | 80              | 4        | 93711                           |
| Jameela Al Foudari | 76              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Taiba Al Ebraheem  | 72              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Nabeela Al Omiri   | 57              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Nawal Al Mugihet   | 35              | 3        | 39848                           |
| Nura Al Darweesh   | 21              | 3        | 39848                           |

Source: Al Qabas Daily Newspaper, May 21, 2008.

### Political Culture in Kuwait

Kuwait, similar to other Arab and Islamic societies, is largely driven by tribal customs and tradition. Such traditions are mostly unsupportive of women's active involvement in politics. Political culture is perceived as an obstacle to women's participation.<sup>17</sup> Though Kuwaitis are much more open to global cultural trends than any other country in the Gulf region, traditions continue to view their role within the domain of the household rather than in public affairs. Kuwaiti society also remains male-oriented

and patriarchal in nature where power and authority resides in the hands of men and the elite. Behind the façade of modernity, tribal traditions remain the dominant cultural framework of Arab societies and politics, but tribes in Kuwait have mastered electoral politics. They are accustomed to conducting primaries and devoting substantial resources to guarantee their electoral dominance in the assembly. Tribes not only have managed to secure their presumed number of candidates (30%), but also added new seats at the expense of women, liberals, and even Islamists. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> districts attest to this trend in 2008, while in 2009 women were unable to win any seat. This does not mean that the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> districts are immune to women's influence. On the contrary, women can win seats in those districts if they manage to coordinate with the tribes and intensify their presence. The experience of tribal women in Jordan and Iraq would be helpful to Kuwaiti women in this regard. In fact, tribes in Arabia proved to be flexible and willing to accommodate women's political participation, and show pride equally in the accomplishment of their male and female members.

### **Lack of Confidence in Women Candidates**

In secret ballot, Kuwaiti women overwhelmingly insist on voting for male candidates. Perhaps they fear the outrage of male figures in their family: husbands, brothers, sons, etc. In other words, they vote as they are instructed to do, and by doing so they continue to demonstrate a lack of confidence in women candidates, though such candidates are not less qualified than their male counterparts.

The Kuwaiti election law grants each voter a number of four votes: one man /four votes, instead of one man /one vote. The objective is to ensure that no tribe or political coalition can control more than 40% of the legislature. If each woman voted, gave one of her four votes to a female candidate, women would have a minimum of five seats and as high as 27/50, taken also into consideration that women account for 57% of the electoral vote in the country.

It is also surprising that women in Kuwait continue to support overwhelmingly male candidates who are opponents of women's rights. Most likely, women's lack of support of their fellow women candidates stems from cultural factors: like other Arab women, they feel more secure placing leadership roles in the hands of men, not women. While it is true that women were overjoyed at their electoral participation in 2006 and 2008, they continued to lack confidence in themselves and their candidates' ability to win seats in parliament. Women seem to be satisfied with their "mere" participation in the election rather than being confident enough to secure at least one seat in the assembly.<sup>18</sup> In 2009, women were much more confident and were determined to win some seats in the National Assembly. Their determination paid off when four women won seats, though they could have done much better had they coordinated among themselves, or built coalitions with other existing political forces in the country.

### **Coalition Building and Building Bridges with Existing Political Forces**

Failure to build coalitions with existing political forces in Kuwait has been the most pervasive element in the inability of women to win any seat in the 2006 and 2008 elections, and at the same time limited the scope of their parliamentary success in 2009. Women had no clear strategy in dealing with conservative and liberal Islamists, tribal coalitions, or even secular liberals who are traditional allies of the women's movement.

The only exception in 2008 was Aseel Awadi, which explains her near success in the 3<sup>rd</sup> district. Had Dashti withdrawn in her favor, Awadi would have ranked 6/10, instead of marginally losing the election, as she ranked the 11<sup>th</sup> in electoral returns. To succeed, women need to realize the necessity of networking and of coordinating closely with political coalitions, otherwise their electoral potential can never be realized.

### **The Maturity of the Women's Movement in Kuwait**

Despite the fact that the Kuwaiti women's movement has been active in public life over fifty years, it is very surprising that its maturity into an orderly, disciplined, and specific goal-oriented movement has been deeply questioned by observers. Women needed to "put their house in order" so that they could successfully participate in politics. An important aspect of maturity in a women's movement is indicated in their members' confidence in women candidates. It is obvious from the past two elections that women had little confidence in their gender. Had women had a minimal level of confidence, they would have won at least five seats in this election. But they not only overwhelmingly voted for male candidates, they also supported traditional foes of the women's movement in the country. Moreover, they seem to have rewarded male candidates who established a reputation of being strongly opposed to women's rights in general and political rights in particular.

The lack of maturity was catastrophic in the 2006 and 2008 elections, while recently women have shown some change in the way they perceive female candidates and their ability to run and win seats in the Assembly. If the women's movement manages to organize, assemble, and mobilize women's vote before the upcoming elections scheduled for 2013, women candidates should win at least 10/50 or 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the seats.

### **Tribal Primaries**

Another aspect cited as an obstacle to women's electoral success was tribal primaries. This partially explains the electoral difficulties women continue to have in Districts 4 and 5, both of which are predominantly tribal in nature. Kuwaiti law criminalized and condemned tribal primaries as an unfair political practice, but tribes continued to organize them. In fact, a major demand in the 2009 election was decriminalizing tribal primaries. From a tribal perspective, primaries assisted tribes in ruling out candidates with the least opportunity to win, therefore concentrating on candidates with better prospects of success. In fact, tribal primaries should be viewed as an indication of political development in Kuwait, rather than being a regression to tribal backwardness and self-centeredness.

Tribes are learning to coexist with modern political forces, and to live in peace with the state and the modern political organization. Instead of blaming or declaring animosity towards tribes for their electoral difficulties, women might attempt to work *with* tribes, and cultivate their strength in winning parliamentary seats. They need to realize that tribalism is the underpinning of Arab politics, and that there are no signs of any decline, rather, the enhancement of tribal role in governance. Tribes have shown a tremendous level of flexibility in adapting to modernity, and providing the safest political framework for their members to participate actively in modern politics. In similar regional cases, female tribal candidates receive tremendous tribal support, as in the case

of Jordan where tribes show pride in their male and female candidates. Thus, it is wrong to assume that tribes are “inherently” anti-women. Coordination with a tribal women’s movement is feasible for women to win strongholds in key political institutions in the country.

### **Islamists and Women in Kuwait**

By far, Islamists are the biggest winners in Kuwaiti elections since the 1980s. Therefore, rather than colliding the women’s movement and Islamists need to learn how to build bridges and develop mutually beneficial working relationships. In addition to tribe, Islam remains the most powerful element in Arab-Islamic politics, and declaring animosity toward Islam is unproductive. Simultaneously, to harbor negativity toward women will lead to a lack of support of Sunni-Islamists, as we have seen in the 2008 and 2009 elections. Both sides have comparable platforms especially in the areas of family, education, housing, pension, immigration reform, employment, national cohesion, etc.

The apparent obstacle to such coordination seems to be ideological. The women’s movement is viewed as too liberal, while Islamists are viewed as too conservative, hence unable to work with each other. This is fundamentally wrong. Between the two movements, the commonalities outweigh differences. Islamists must view women as allies and assets rather than foes, and vice-versa. Islamists are not a monolithic movement in Kuwait. Shi’at Islamists are strongly supportive of women’s political participation, while there is an apparent split among Sunni-Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood is split on the issue, and predominantly supportive of women’s rights, while Salafi-Islamists oppose women’s participation on doctrinal grounds.

### **Conclusion**

Women have been active participants in the socio-economic and political life of Kuwait, but while their accomplishments in the fields of social and economic development were impressive, they lagged behind in area of political participation. In this light, the latest success of women in sending four representatives to the National Assembly is remarkable by all standards. Women constitute 57% of the overall vote in Kuwait, and if they manage to channel their huge electoral potential and overcome some of the structural obstacles that limit their electoral successes they will win a substantial number of seats in the 2013 elections. It is obvious that they have gained some ground in the 2009 elections, but they can do better if they coordinate and mobilize. Women need to be fully prepared for the upcoming elections and deal with the electoral obstacles immediately, given the fact that parliaments in Kuwait hardly ever serve their full constitutional term of four years. They are regularly dissolved in their first or second year of term due to the customary discord between government and parliament. Typically, Kuwaiti rulers take the side of the government, dissolve the parliament, and call for fresh elections. New elections produce similar challenges between the government and the parliament leading to regular dissolution of the parliament. Women need to consider restructuring their movement and incorporate all factions into an orderly and goal-oriented movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Kuwaiti Constitution at: [http://www.kuwait-info.com/a\\_state\\_system/state\\_system\\_articles1.asp](http://www.kuwait-info.com/a_state_system/state_system_articles1.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 63

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- <sup>3</sup> Kuwait's modified article I/25/1962 at: <http://www.glin.gov/view.action?glinID=176017>
- <sup>4</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 43
- <sup>5</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 72
- <sup>6</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 77
- <sup>7</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 143
- <sup>8</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 44
- <sup>9</sup> Al-Mughni, Ibid, P 173
- <sup>10</sup> KUNA: Kuwait Press Agency, May 16, 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> UNDP-Kuwait: <http://www.undp-kuwait.org/>
- <sup>12</sup> Gorge Atif, May 11, 2009 Aljareda
- <sup>13</sup> Al Jareeda, May 12, 2009
- <sup>14</sup> Olimat, Muhamad, Women and Politics in Kuwait, *Journal of International Women's Studies* Vol. 11 #2 November 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Al-Ahram Weekly, 6/29/2006.
- <sup>16</sup> For more information on inter-women conflicts see, Al Qabas, May 19, 2008, and Al Jarida, May 19, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> For more information, see: Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "Arab, Not Muslim Exceptionalism," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15:4, Oct. 2004. Also: Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao, "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16:3, July, 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Theodoulou, Michael, Times Daily, June 29, 2006.